

Following Aunt Harriet's Light: Or My Route into Folklore & Multicultural Work

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One of the pivotal episodes that shaped me as both an academic and a public folklorist came from an experience in my eighth grade English class. Our whole class had been assigned to read a biography about Harriet Tubman for a new unit; I devoured this book not only for its splendid writing style but also for the life story it revealed. For the first time in my entire school existence, we read about an African American woman, an image with which I could especially identify. For once, I could talk in class about a strong Black American woman who was a true heroic figure, a real woman who was distinguished from the ignorant and buffoonish stereotypes permeating much of American popular culture. Presented as an intelligently powerful, ingenious and defiant black woman grounded in southern rural black traditions, Tubman's image came to life for me. Her strengths were like those I had seen in my grandmother and great-grandmother. Unbeknownst to me, I was desperately in need of such an image in my educational curricula. Upon reading about her, I immediately claimed her as one of my great aunts to some of my white classmates. They dismissed my assertion because they were sure they would have heard about such a relationship before this unit. Nonetheless, my whole class benefited from learning about a hero of a group whose humanity had particularly been invisible during segregation.

The power of hearing voices or reading literature that reflected experiences with which I was familiar has always stayed with me and guided my work. It awakened in me the need to hear and read the rich voices and untold stories of many "ordinary" African Americans, and other people of color, as an integral part of the educational curriculum. But I did not recognize that I could work to address this lack of representation until several years later when as an undergraduate and beginning graduate student I began to research the history of African Americans in classical music and musical theater. The quest to uncover information mostly in oral circulation convinced me that through the study of folklore I could find a way to fill in this deficit in scholarship. I decided to dedicate my career to documenting and publicly presenting stories of African-American life and culture so that African-American people, like myself, could connect with heroic images, authentic stories, rich cultural traditions, and unsung achievements.

As a public folklorist, I have sought to learn about and present the complexities and truths of people's experiences, sifting through the distortions provided by stereotypes, bias, and racism. In my work, I have striven to create and facilitate contextualized opportunities for people to publicly share their stories or creatively express their worldviews in their own voices.